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Mapping Skills: A Roadmap for India and the UAE

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The large-scale migration of blue-collar workers from India to the UAE took off after the oil crisis of 1973. Photo: Getty Images / ymgerman

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ABSTRACT

The presence of almost nine million Indian nationals in the Gulf region makes India a key source of human capital for the six GCC nations. The majority of these Indians are blue-collar workers engaged in low-paying jobs. As countries like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) move up the technology ladder, they are increasingly seeking workers with specific, certified skills. This report outlines a pilot project for the mapping, harmonisation and accreditation of India's skill development programmes with the specific job requirements in UAE and Saudi Arabia. This will enable Indian workers to secure a wage premium and strengthen the India-GCC migration corridor. Lessons from the pilot project can be applied to other migration corridors.

INTRODUCTION

There is significant complementarity between the Indian economy and the economies of the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), especially in terms of human resources. The GCC states are wealthy but sparsely populated and heavily reliant on expatriate workers across the entire skills spectrum—from blue-collar workers to highly trained professionals. This is particularly true in the case of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where 3.42 million Indians constitute almost 35 percent of the country's population, of which 70 percent broadly fall in the blue-collar category. Some have received formal vocational training, but in the absence of a skills harmonisation and accreditation programme, they often start as entry-level employees and fail to secure a wage premium.

Until 2018, the mutual recognition of academic qualifications only applied to university and professional degrees. Certificates and diplomas issued by vocational training institutions fell outside the scope of the bilateral arrangements, putting the most vulnerable sections of the migrant community at an additional disadvantage. Tangible economic benefits for workers and productivity gains for employers can be ensured through a combination of skill harmonisation projects, which will align some of India's skill development programmes with the qualification requirements in the UAE, and the recognition of specified Indian vocational training certificates by the UAE accreditation authorities. A fruitful starting point can be a pilot project in the UAE, which could be scaled up if proven successful. Moreover, such a project can also be applied to other major migration corridors that link specific labour-source countries with labour-destination ones.

THE CONTEXT

Despite being a small country, the UAE is significant to India's labour and emigration policies. It hosts the largest concentration of Indian nationals outside of India: 3.42 million out of a total population of under 10 million.¹ The International Organisation of Migration (IOM) calls it the second-busiest migration corridor in the world after the Mexico–US corridor. The UAE's leadership often acknowledges that Indians have played a key role in building the country. From shining skyscrapers such as the Burj Khalifa to the vast retail, construction and financial sectors—the Indian footprint is omnipresent in the UAE.

Currently, around 70 percent of the 3.42 million Indians in the UAE can be categorised as blue-collar workers.² Many of them arrive with minimal skills, acquire some training and experience on the job, and remain stranded near the bottom of the wage pyramid. Most of these migrant workers remit a large part of their earnings back to India. In 2018, remittances from the UAE reached US\$18.5 billion, or one-fifth of India's total inbound remittances of US\$79 billion.³ From a macroeconomic perspective, these constitute almost two percent of India's GDP and provide a crucial cushion in India's balance of payments.

While UAE emirates, such as Dubai and Sharjah, have had a thriving Indian business community for over 100 years, the large-scale migration of Indian blue-collar workers took off only after the oil crisis of 1973. Prices of crude oil quadrupled within a short span of time, and the newly acquired wealth allowed the country to embark on a massive expansion in construction activities that transformed sleepy desert villages and towns into affluent modern cities. Workers from South Asia, predominantly from India and Pakistan, played a key role in building the infrastructure and providing the backbone of a rapidly expanding services sector.

Indian workers are considered honest, hard-working and disciplined, and are therefore preferred for low-skill, low-pay jobs that service a wealthy society. However, even before the current economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it had become clear that this model would not be sustainable. Having appointed both a Minister for the Future and a Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence, the UAE has declared its ambitions of moving up the value chain to become a global knowledge hub. As an increasing number of industries move up the technology ladder, the UAE has started to notify the skills that will be required for working in about 71 different vocations.

THE PROCESS

India was the first country to start working closely on the skills portfolio with the UAE's Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MoHRE). In doing so, it had specific objectives:

- a) To keep pace with upskilling in the UAE and retain India's position as both the largest and the most-preferred source of expatriate workers;
- b) To create a framework that would incentivise employers to hire workers with certified skills in lieu of uncertified workers who could be hired on a lower wage;
- c) To enable Indian workers to move up the value chain by getting a wage premium for their skills; and
- d) To create a skill-mapping and harmonisation template between a labour-source country and a labour-host country that could be replicated in other countries in the Gulf or beyond.

Table 1: Timeline for the Pilot Project

October 2017: Meeting between the MoHRE and India's Ministry of Skills Development and Entrepreneurship in Abu Dhabi

April 2018: India-UAE Skills Conference in Abu Dhabi; bilateral meetings between government officials to formulate the pilot project

September 2018: The visit of the UAE's technical team to India; discussions on equivalence and accreditation of Indian certificates

November 2018: Meeting in Dubai between Indian Minister Dharmendra Pradhan and UAE Minister Nasser Al Hameli to push the project

April 2019: Joint India-UAE presentation on a skill-mapping project at the Abu Dhabi Dialogue—a regional consultative process between 11 labour-origin and seven labour-destination countries

April 2019: MoU signed between the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) and Emirates Driving Academy to provide skilled drivers from India

October 2019: The first batch of skilled Indian workers presented with joint certificates during the visit of India's Minister of State for External Affairs for Abu Dhabi Dialogue

October 2019: An MoU on skill-mapping signed between the NSDC and Takamol Holdings of Saudi Arabia

December 2019: The first batch of skilled Indian workers selected for Saudi Arabia

Senior MoHRE officials decided to showcase the India-UAE skill-mapping project at the Abu Dhabi Dialogue (ADD),⁴ a regional consultative grouping of 18 Asian countries—with 11 labour-origin nations that are part of the Colombo process and six labour-destination countries of the GCC plus Malaysia. The ADD, which seeks to promote safe, orderly and regular migration, is important because migrants constitute over 36 percent of the population of GCC and account for almost 12 percent of the global migrant population. The 11 Asian countries provide an overwhelming majority of the migrants in GCC, their annual remittances constituting US\$ 100 billion, i.e. one-sixth of global remittances. Thus, an India-UAE joint presentation was made in April 2019, at the Senior Officials Meeting of the ADD in Dubai.⁵ It flagged several sectors where an India certification could be recognised as 'appropriate quality' for the UAE employers. The two countries agree on a five-stage process under the Harmonised Framework for Skill:

1. Aligning UAE and Indian occupational qualifications
2. Training/upskilling and certification in accordance with standards
3. Recognition of Indian awarding bodies
4. Creating upskilling infrastructure in the UAE
5. Incentivised recruitment and retention of skilled workers

The Pilot Project

So far, the NSDC has worked with the MoHRE and Abu Dhabi Quality and Conformity Council (ADQCC) to match the competencies of 13 UAE qualifications. Their technical teams have conducted several meetings and workshops to finalise the benchmarking, including assessment protocols. Details of these qualifications, which can be mapped to relevant Indian Qualification Packs, are provided in Annexure 1.

The UAE has also started work on a programme that encourages private-sector employers to hire workers with certified skills. To do so, it has reduced the work permit fee for certified workers by an average of 50 percent, creating a significant financial incentive per worker, ranging from AED 700 to AED 2700 (INR 14,000–54,000).

India and the UAE have jointly initiated a pilot project for skill certification, and the mobility of workers under the Harmonised Framework for Skill. Candidates were mobilised by Indian training centres and went through the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) drives on benchmarked qualification by the concerned Indian Skills Sector Councils (SSCs). Of the candidates, 133 successfully cleared the SSC assessment and, of these, 63 were selected for deployment by the UAE’s government-proposed employer—the NBTC Group. Interviews were conducted between 15 and 18 September 2019 at Kochi, Kolkata and Ranchi.⁶

Recognising the symbolic importance of this vital first step, it was decided to award Indian and UAE skill certificates to the successful candidates at a ceremony conducted on the side-lines of the ADD Ministerial Meeting in October 2019, in the presence of the MoHRE Minister Nasser Al Hameli and the Indian Minister of State for External Affairs V. Muraleedharan.⁷

Figure 1: Skill Verification Certification by Country



SKILL HARMONISATION WITH SAUDI ARABIA

An important outcome of the joint presentation on the UAE–India skill harmonisation programme during the ADD meeting in April 2019 was the interest expressed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) for a similar joint initiative. Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Labour (MoL) is in the process of launching a Skills Verification Programme (SVP), under which blue-collar workers may have to undergo skill verification on specified skill standards, at

designated assessment centres in their country of origin. The SVP is expected to become a mandatory requirement for migrant workers in the listed occupations and will work in parallel to the current process for obtaining medical certificates for migrant workers at accredited centres at a prescribed fee.

Discussions between Indian and Saudi authorities led to the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in October 2019, providing for skill harmonisation in 10 occupations including electrician, plumber, automotive and air-conditioning. The MoU lists the following agreements:

- The creation of a network of assessment centres (Trade Test Centres) across India to deliver assessments in the identified benchmarked qualifications for potential migrant workers
- The formulation of advocacy programmes to popularise the initiative amongst candidates and drive enrolments at the identified exam centres
- The delivery of assessments through ‘sector skill councils’ on the identified qualifications at identified assessment centres and the issuance of joint certification by the NSDC/SSC and MoL/Takamol Holding
- Takamol Holding to liaise with the KSA authorities to make the programme mandatory and recognise the skill certificates to permit migration of candidates in the identified occupations

As of December 2019, a pilot skill-verification programme has been completed for 100 candidates for the Saudi Binladin Group. Out of 100 candidates, 81 have successfully qualified for the joint-skill certification.

Figure 2: India–UAE Joint Skill Verification Certificate



THE NEXT STEPS

UAE

1. An official notification will be provided by the UAE government to recognise MSDE/NSDC-approved awarding bodies.
2. The NSDC will link IT processes for validating candidates certified through QR code/unique certificate number.
3. The MoHRE will announce incentives by the UAE for employers to hire workers under recognised standards.
4. Both the UAE and India will work to expand the set of recognised occupational standards. Additional anticipated sectors include healthcare, tourism and hospitality, security, domestic work, retail, and 'Future Technologies' (e.g. blockchain, 3D printing and AI)

Saudi Arabia

1. A recognition ceremony will be organised by the MoL upon arrival of candidates in KSA.
2. Takamol and the NSDC teams will work on the finalisation of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) between stakeholders.
3. The two teams will work for the integration of IT platforms between NSDC /Takamol for the verification of certification.
4. The NSDC will work with Takamol to make the Skill Verification Programme (SVP) mandatory for mobility through an official notification.

BEYOND THE GULF

The skill-mapping project is a structural mechanism that offers critical recommendations. It also allows other labour-source countries to analyse and adopt these recommendations. The learnings from the India-UAE skill-mapping project can be further applied to select cases of Africa-Europe migration and intra-African migration in Western and Southern Africa. The IOM lists Egypt, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan and Algeria as the countries sending the largest number of migrants overseas, with Algeria-France, Egypt-UAE, Morocco-France, Morocco-Spain, Tunisia-France and Sudan-Saudi Arabia being some of the busiest migration corridors.⁸ Additionally, there are several

major migration corridors within the African continent, as people move from less developed or troubled countries to relatively more prosperous neighbours. These include Burkina Faso–Cote d’Ivoire, Somalia–Kenya, Zimbabwe–South Africa, South Sudan–Ethiopia and Benin–Nigeria. Such migration trends indicate the potential benefit of skill-mapping projects for both the source and destination countries. However, the actualisation of such a project is heavily dependent on active international collaboration as well as efficient planning and structuring. Governments must account for the resources available for skill-training and their relevance within the regional context, especially from an economic perspective.

CONCLUSION

The India–UAE skill harmonisation programme has had a modest but important beginning. Its significance lies in attempting to align the requirements of a labour-destination country with the training programmes of the labour-origin country in a way that benefits both sides. The UAE’s enlistment and certification of the first batch of workers, after an extensive due-diligence process, is testimony to the credibility of the Indian certification system. Moreover, its willingness to modify its visa regime to incentivise the recruitment of certified workers sends a strong message to employers.

India’s e-migrate platform, which seeks to provide a regulated pathway for the migration of blue-collar workers, ensures a model contract that empanels reputed manpower companies and provides verified details of the employers, providing a degree of protection for the rights of workers. The next step will be integrating this platform with the labour portals of countries such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Extensive discussions have been conducted between governments and technical experts to ensure a smooth pathway for both workers and employers, and to ensure that contracts registered through the system are enforceable in local courts.

From India’s perspective, the pilot project for skills harmonisation facilitates the recruitment of Indian workers into better-paying jobs, which will have a positive impact on their living conditions as well as the remittances they can send home. The KSA government has implemented a similar project, which acts as a force multiplier for the pilot project and offers a robust template that can be adapted for other countries in the Gulf and beyond. Already, discussions are underway with diverse nations such as Japan and Russia.

Once the Gulf economies start recovering from the twin shocks of COVID-19 and low oil prices, the skills harmonisation programme can be intensified. The NSDC is gearing up for this by creating a network of 600 centres across India, which will have the capacity for skilling and certifying up to 40,000 workers annually for jobs in the Gulf and in other countries. As the project gathers momentum, it can be extended beyond the construction sector. There is a growing demand for care workers in developed countries with ageing populations. A similar harmonisation of India's training programmes with host-country requirements can create jobs and lift millions out of poverty.

The Government of India must take a holistic approach to maximise gains from sectors where short training programmes can create tangible opportunities for overseas employment. Close coordination between the Ministry of Skills Development, the Ministry of External Affairs and the NSDC in Delhi, and engagement with the relevant state governments and skill-development organisations, will ensure that the training programmes and curricula are standardised, but with sufficient flexibility to be tailored for specific geographies. The Union government must also ensure the credibility of the certification process, with appropriate supervision by a body such as the proposed National Council for Vocational Education and Training (NCVET). India's learnings in this space can be further shared with countries in Africa that stand to benefit from such a programme. [ORF](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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ANNEXURE 1**FIRST PHASE BENCHMARKING OF UAE-INDIA SKILL QUALIFICATIONS**

| | UAE | INDIA | | |
|----|---|---|----------------|-------------------|
| | Occupational Term | QP Name | QP Code | NSQF Level |
| 1 | ADOT Electrician – Level 3 | Construction Electrician - LV | CON/Q0603 | 4 |
| 2 | Electrical Technical Supervisor | Supervisor - Electrical Works | CON/Q0605 | 6 |
| 3 | Automotive Painter Level 4 | Repair Painter Auto Body Level 4 | ASC/Q1406 | 4 |
| 4 | Automotive Technician Level 4 – Electrician | Automotive Electrician Level 4 | ASC/Q1408 | 4 |
| 5 | Level 2 Trade Assistant Mason Block Layer | Assistant Mason | CON/Q0102 | 2 |
| | | Assistant Mason, and one NOS CON/N0111 of Mason General – CON/Q0103 | CON/Q0103 | 2 |
| 6 | Level 2 Trade Assistant Mason Plasterer | Mason General | CON/Q0103 | 2 |
| 7 | Level 3 Senior Trade Assistant Mason | Mason- Tiling | CON/Q0104 | 4 |
| | | Assistant Mason | CON/Q0102 | 2 |
| 8 | Automotive Welder Level 4 | Repair Welder | ASC/Q1902 | 4 |
| 9 | Automotive Body Repairer Level 3 | Auto Body Repair Technician | ASC/Q1410 | 3 |
| 10 | Automotive Technician Level 4 - Mechanic | Auto Service Technician Level 4 | ASC/Q1402 | 4 |
| 11 | Level 1 Construction worker Electrical | Construction Electrician- LV | CON/Q0603 | 4 |
| 12 | Level 2 Trade Assistant Electrician | Assistant Electrician | CON/Q0602 | 3 |
| 13 | ADOT Electrical Engineer | Foreman Electrical Works (Construction) | CON/Q0604 | 5 |

ENDNOTES

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